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Amemorial sermon

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In Memoriam

JOHN DWIGHT

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John Dwight

A Memorial Sermon

Preached in the Church of the Puritans, New York City, by the Rev. Charles J. Young, D.D., Pastor, December 13, 1903, in memory of John Dwight

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Sermon

". . . And thou shalt be missed, because thy seat will be empty."
I Samuel, xx, 28.

IT is one of the peculiarities of Bible language that it frequently suggests a great deal more than it expresses; that is, it not only states a fact, or relates an incident, but the very method of this statement—the phraseology used—awakens trains of thought that stretch far away beyond the sources or circumstance which gave rise to them. The original application may be very local, and limited, but the ultimate sweep of the truth, its principle and scope, may be as wide as the world, and as broad as humanity. The illustrations of this fact are scattered broadcast all through the Bible, but there is not time to refer to any other than the one selected this morning as our text.

These were the words of Jonathan to his young friend David, at a time when it became necessary for him to explain the latter's absence at the King's table. You remember that David was accustomed to occupy a prominent position at the royal feasts.

But the King had become intensely jealous of

David and bitter toward him, on account of his growing influence among the people, and so it became necessary for him to fly in secret from the palace and presence of the King. But the two friends, devoted to each other with a loyal, loving, manly friendship, had managed to meet quietly away off in the fields by themselves. It was at such an interview these words were uttered. The Feast of the New Moon was to occur on the morrow, and King Saul would unquestionably discover the absence of David, so Jonathan anticipating trouble exclaims, "Thou shalt be missed, because thy seat will be empty."

It is long, long ages since the words were spoken. Vast and varied changes have swept over this old, sad, weary world since the time when the two friends met together, in the fields of Gibeah. In material things at least, the race today looks out on a "new heaven and a new earth." And yet in spite of it all, time, change, progress, transformations, here they are the same words just as fresh and fitting and timely as when they first fell from the lips of the true-hearted Jonathan long ago.

As applied to the venerable and honored friend in whose memory this service is held; with respect to the wide and important interests which are today so deeply affected by his absence, and as the aptest expression I could find of the testimony of a

cloud of witnesses representing these interests, I take up that old cry of friendship and bereavement,—Oh venerable Father in Israel!

> "Oh good gray head which all men knew,
> * * * * That tower of strength
> Which stood foursquare to all the winds that blew,"

surely "thou shalt be missed, because thy seat will be empty."

In yonder home where with patriarchal dignity and grace thou didst rule by love; in the commercial centre where for fifty-seven years thy name was a synonym of business honor, integrity and fair dealing with thy fellow man; in this Church where every page of her history, every step of her progress, every agency of her benevolent and missionary work bears witness to thy unstinted and ungrudging generosity,—in all these directions thou shalt be sorely and deeply missed "because thy seat will be empty."

Nor here alone. In the wider fields of the Redeemer's Kingdom, in the mission work at home and abroad, in institutions of education and art, in the South Land with the destitute and neglected mountain whites, among the American Indians, freedmen, seamen; everywhere that the good Spirit of God directed thy charities, thou shalt be this day mourned as well as missed with unfeigned sorrow.

And yet, let there be no mistake as to the meaning of the message and service this morning. We are not here to attempt to tabulate the long list of benefactions of this honored man. I believe such an attempt would be as distasteful to him and to those who are nearest to him, as it would be impossible to accomplish. I believe Mr. Dwight, as much as any man who ever made good use of life, illustrated Archbishop Trench's beautiful prayer: "God grant that day by day we may do more and may esteem it less." Neither are we here, in the least degree, to idealize or spiritualize a character whose chief encouragement for other men lies in the fact that it was intensely human. The very opposite is the end in view. It is to show what a real human life can become when that life is surrendered to and permeated by the spirit of his Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. It is to let men know that there is a power in the religion of Christ to stimulate to the highest, noblest, grandest things, when that religion is permitted to have its way in the human heart and character. It is to let men feel that Christian philanthrophy and usefulness have their spring and source away back in the heart of Him who said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." That is the object of this service, and I claim for it a place of very high and timely significance. For, breth-

ren, from such a life proceeds the mightiest argument that can be offered to men for fair dealing, and uprightness in business transactions.

Such a life is God Almighty's grandest protest against the far too common violation of the ordinary laws of common honesty in business. It is the best object lesson in the world for the young men coming to the front. It teaches them that real success is not what a large part of the business world now regard it. It is not a flash in the pan. It is not a lucky hit, or fortunate speculation. And emphatically it is not the bare-faced robbery of manipulated values, created to deceive the unwary who in their innocence and ignorance are chasing rainbows. Not that, is the foundation of any such success as this true man achieved.

This life, just passed into life triumphant and glorious—teaches men that real success, the success that abides and endures, is a product of principles as deep and changeless as the throne of God. Principles of a living faith in a living God, principles of an enlightened and well regulated conscience responding to the claims of moral law and Christain obligation, principles that rule the heart and will,—and let us say with reverent significance the pocket also,—principles whose embodiment in the life and character of this rare man bring to his memory today such a tribute of love,

honor and regard, as but very few men of fifty-seven years of business life in this great metropolis have ever been crowned with. This is the aim of this service. Is it not one way of obeying the Master's injunction, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in Heaven."

Like many another a good man, like George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, James A. Garfield, John Ruskin, John Wesley, and a long line of the most illustrious men this world has ever known, John Dwight owed a great deal to the fact that he was born right. I mean by that, not merely that he was born in the grand old Bay State and in South Hadley—the very centre of rich Colonial, Revolutionary and Puritan history, though that was certainly a great deal taking all things into consideration—but I mean what Cowper meant when he boasted of the fact that he was "born of parents passed into the skies," born of a God-fearing, God-respecting, God-loving mother. There is no part of this man's life that I have ever heard of where you cannot find that fact illustrated. The key that opens the treasury of his experience, his character and power to influence and help men, lies in a single sentence: "the Grace of God and mother's training."

Take one or two illustrations, I cannot multiply

them for obvious reasons. In 1844 the young man went West to the Rock River country, Illinois, there secured a sheep ranch, and then returned to arrange his affairs, intending to go back and settle down for life in the West. The mother was aged and feeble then, and the distance to Illinois seemed as great in proportion as the distance to Alaska would seem to any of us here this morning, if similarly situated. So a great grief settled on the mother's heart at the idea of what was perhaps a life-long separation from her son. It decided him in a moment. He gave up the West and came to a city where he could reach that mother in a night and day. So mother-love decided the point between what was then the far West and life in New York City for fifty-seven years.

Very often he bore testimony with humble but loyal love, to the fact that if he ever accomplished any good in the world, or did anything to help his fellow men by the use of means God had given him, he owed it all to his mother's sixpence, and to some words she said to him when a boy, as she put that sixpence in his hands. It was the night of the monthly concert of prayer for foreign missions, and the sixpence was his to do just what he pleased with. Now John Dwight would not have been the boy he certainly was in all that that implies, if there had not been

a sharp struggle in his heart between the heathen and himself,—but the heathen won.

Now will you mark the significance of that victory through the far reaching streams of beneficence that have made glad many a waste place, since they started from that little spring in South Hadley so long ago. On the first Sabbath of last month, we had our annual offering for foreign missions in this church. He was then in his last illness, and undoubtedly he knew it, for the mind remained clear to the very end. One of the family went home from the morning service and said something regarding it, and the object of the offering that day. He called for his check book and instantly gave the generous sum which made the offering so large this year. Mother passion in the boy's life, and mother passion strong in death at eighty-four! Oh mothers, mothers! what immense possibilities God has placed in your hands for moulding lives and developing character! Between that sixpence in South Hadley so long ago, and that check on the death bed last month, what a long, long record of munificent giving there has been. And yet, my friends, as the streams are to the spring in the mountain, as the oak tree is to the acorn, so is that record of generous giving to the mother's love and the mother's sixpence in that old New England christian

home. Verily that woman in France was right when she said to Napoleon: "What France needs most is good mothers."

And so now we can understand more clearly I think, why it was that in season and out of season, everywhere, he gave wisely, gave intelligently, gave with judgment, yet so largely and so constantly for the cause of God and the wellfare of his fellow men. Shall I say here what I have the very best possible authority for saying, that he gave not because he did not know the value of every dollar thus given, that is, not because he did not have any natural feeling of reluctance in giving it. He did. But he gave because the grace of God and his Christian mother taught him effectively that "None of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself, for whether we live we live unto the Lord or whether we die we die unto the Lord." Hence, his giving was a majestic testimony to the power of Christ to overcome natural tendencies.

But John Dwight gave himself as well as his substance to the work of the Master. He did not fail in the effort and labor necessary for the extension of Christ's kingdom. With his gifts went also with equal generosity his personal activity as officer and worker. From the time of his early manhood until advanced in age, so I have been

informed, he was a teacher in the Sabbath school. When an elder in the Chelsea Presbyterian Church, of which the Rev. Dr. E. Dunlap Smith was then the pastor, he conducted for many years a bible class composed of both young men and women, and taught from year to year the epistle of Paul to the Romans, often spending the most of his leisure moments during the entire week, and sometimes studying as many as twenty hours, in his preparation for this class. Besides this labor in his own church he interested himself in the work of the American Sunday School Union, and for a number of years taught a class of young men in Union Sunday School, No. 120, on Ninth Avenue.

As to Mr. Dwight's relation to this church it becomes a great deal more difficult for me to speak, and the difficulty is too obvious to need explanation. The first thousand dollars that secured the site on which this building stands today, came from that liberal hand, and that organ too, that has rung out God's praises, which he loved to listen to, is but the resonant monument of the same liberality. Twenty-five or thirty years ago a crisis came to the struggling congregation as recorded in that beautiful little book of my predecessor, Dr. Clark, "The Story of the Church of the Puritans." The mortgage was about to be forclosed and the property taken out of the hands of the little flock, but

the one foremost to the rescue with means to save it was the one in whose memory we gather here this morning.

I sat in his summer home, several years ago, at Mount Holyoke, when he told me of a message that he had just received from Northfield, the home of Dwight L. Moody, and there, by degrees, I got this touching story. When Moody's little library was burned to ashes in the great Chicago fire, and the news was printed here in the New York papers,—the very day that he read the story a telegram flashed to Chicago with a large contribution to replace the books that had just perished in the flames. And from that time until the time I visited him, and I have no doubt until the end, no year passed without his remembering the work of this great evangelist.

Then too he had a large and constant interest in the work of the Seaman Friend's Society whose honored Secretary, Rev. Dr. W. C. Stett, has led our devotions this morning. An interest, not merely as Trustee and Director and constant attendant at the noon-day prayer meeting, but in the eternal salvation of these much tempted and neglected men. That was the best thing about Mr. Dwight's benificence, it was permeated through and through by a high and holy passion for the souls of men. Sitting in his own home here in the city he

told me of the conversion of the sailor, John Byrne. I had never heard that story. Byrne was before my time, but I distinctly remember how absorbed in interest I was as he told me the details of that man's conversion, how the spirit of God filled that rough, wild sailor, until he became a power for the salvation for men.

I am greatly privileged in holding in my hand today a copy of the *Sailor's Magazine* with an article from Mr. Dwight's pen. It is said this is probably the only article he ever wrote for publication. It is the story of the conversion of John Byrne and Mr. Dwight's personal experience with him. It is the same story he had told me written out. I wish to read you the closing sentences, for nothing could illustrate so well the man's exhalted spiritual mindedness in his efforts to save and uplift humanity. The words are pathetic, beautiful, and above all, true.

He is speaking of the great revival of 1857, in this City in connection with the story of John Byrne: "Oh the wondrous power of the Spirit, that Almighty power which wrought in Christ when He rose from the dead! Who will dare say it was not the descent again of cloven tongues to inspire with new life and light the men of the sea? For the past thirty-five years this light has shone forth from that upper chamber of the Sailor's

Home, still consecrated to prayer and private conversation. That it may continue to prove a very Bethel, 'A house of God,' to many a new born soul, will ever be the prayer of those who labor for the spiritual welfare of the men of the sea." If he had never written another line for the press that article would distinguish him as having the spirit of Christ, yearning like his Master for the souls of men.

But we must draw a line somewhere, though it is difficult to be brief with such a subject. I would like to speak of his interest in literature and art shown in his gift to Mount Holyoke College, of the beautiful building devoted to these objects. I would like to speak of his culture and tell you of the nights I sat with him watching the stars through his telescopes, on the top of Mt. Holyoke. That which surprised me was that he seemed as familiar with the heavenly bodies, with the names of planets, constellations and the whole surface of the moon, mountains, plains and valleys, as I was with the streets of the city we live in. I pass this by; this is not a biography, it is just a flower dropped upon the memory of a man whom to know was to love.

No one can be more conscious than I of the inadequacy of the tribute. The impulse to enlarge is checked everywhere by the obvious limitations

of the time and service. But one great truth forces itself upon us and with the statement of it I close.

This rapid backward look however dim and narrow over such a life, compels us in the very nature of things to look up and on toward another life as the only adequate consummation of such a character.

It seems to me as if it were almost an insult to common reason to believe that this life so grand and full and rich in good works has ceased to exist!

That this man who touched human life at so many different points, and everywhere with clean Christly helpful contact, everywhere doing something and giving something to help man Godward, has passed away forever from conscious being and development!

That this man like the psalmist's tree "planted by the rivers of nature and bearing fruit in old age," is now plucked up by the roots! A fire that kindled into a living glow many a sad heart in this cold selfish world has burned itself out into ashes! A shining light that led many a voyager across the stormy sea of life has at last gone out itself into the blackness of darkness forever!

My fellow men, does such an awful contradiction as that appeal to either your judgment or common sense? In the very nature of things we

are forced by this noble, unselfish, godly life to cry out a thousand times "No." Every instinct of a true nature demands something grander and more glorious than all that can be compassed in the life that now is.

Blessed be that Gospel that brings life and immortality to light by the very existence upon earth of such a character—that declares that all the past is but the germ of a glorious future, bringing in a completion that eye hath not seen nor ear heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive. Blessed be the Son of the Eternal God who says: "Come ye blessed of my Father enter into the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was sick and ye visited me; I was hungry and ye fed me; I was naked and ye clothed me; in prison and ye came unto me. Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye did it unto me." Blessed be the Gospel that declares that life here is not the end but the beginning; the grave, not the grave of any child of God but only of the earthly house he stopped in a little while.

Blessed be the voice that cries from innermost glory to every such life: "Where I am there ye shall be also," and "they that turn many to righteousness shall shine as the stars forever." Thank God the very fact of such a life demands immortal-

ity as the only reasonable explanation of its existence. There *must* be another life to explain and complete and perfect all of which this life only begins.

"There the faded flowers shall freshen,"
Freshen nevermore to fade;
There the shaded skies shall brighten,
Brighten nevermore to fade;
Brothers we shall meet and rest,
Mid the holy and the blest.

There the band is never broken,
Partings, claspings, sighs, unknown;
Midnight waking, twilight weeping,
Heavy noontide, all are gone.
Brothers we shall meet and rest,
Mid the holy and the blest."

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